

Attempts of a Participatory Approach to Helping Improve the Value and Appreciation of Geriatric Nursing in Germany – Looking at the “PflegeWert” Project from an Action Research Perspective

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All collaborations can be characterised by power and participation and how those forces are distributed within the group. Action Research's distinctive feature is that 'ordinary' people are actively involved in the entire research process, as they are entrusted with tasks and take on responsibilities that are otherwise often reserved for researchers (Arieli et al., 2009, p. 265). In this sense, Action Research can be understood as “a democratic relationship, in which both sides exercise power and shared control over decision-making as well as interpretation” (ibid). In this paper we try to analyse the relationships and structures of power in a project that dealt with the appreciation of nursing services in geriatric care in Germany, so-called *Altenpflege*. Consistent with the idea of Action Research, the project was conducted by research partners and practitioners working in geriatric care. In order to take a closer look at the conflicts that took place, and to identify the role of communication in this collaboration of different personalities, three retrospective interviews were conducted. The project's reflection highlighted that an equitable dialogue between researchers and practitioners can unveil differences and conflicts and help to overcome them. With this paper we intent to encourage more Action Research projects in Germany by reflectively illustrating a successful project with its “ups” and especially its “downs”.

Key words: power, participation, conflict, nursing, appreciation

1. Introduction

This paper is the result of reflecting the work that was done during the PflegeWert project from 2009-2011, and is written by the co-ordinator of the project, a human factors researcher, and a social scientist, who was not part of the project but who interviewed some of the other project members who did participate. PflegeWert was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in Germany. PflegeWert means value of nursing/caring.

Even though PflegeWert had not been explicitly designed as an Action Research project, the reflection of this project wants to give an impulse for discussion within the Action Research community as well as within the German service science community on the stronger consideration of Action Research in the future.

Practically, our PflegeWert project aimed at exploring and improving the value and appreciation of nursing services in geriatric care in Germany. That means our project not only intended to analyse the situation of geriatric nursing but to actually help changing geriatric care's position of power in Germany through participation and dialogue. Therefore participation as well as power played an important role in this project. Since those factors also shaped our discussions within the coordinating committee, they will be analysed furthermore in this paper by the example of the conflicts that arose.

A dialogic process between praxis and science was the basis for the unfolding of socio-political effects in the course of this project. When it comes to this dialogic process, our project was guided by Werner Fricke's recommendation, saying that new knowledge, theoretical as well as practical knowledge, originates in action-research from the dialogue of scientists and practitioners (Fricke, 2013, p. 5). How this dialogue was cultivated and held within our PflegeWert project team will be described in detail later in this paper.

Reflecting on our project, we realised that we have mostly failed at initiating such a dialogic process with the geriatric nurses, who work at the participating facilities, as we mostly interacted within our co-ordinating committee, which only consisted of executives and researchers. So only at certain points of the project were we able to enter into dialogue with the nurses themselves,

e.g. for the development of a concept for a regular “nursing success reflection talk” and at multiple public project events, where those nurses were actively involved in a dialogue with various people from politics and the public.

All together this paper intends to

- illustrate how a participative and dialogue-oriented research approach can unfold in a social emancipatory way, and in this sense have “powerful” effects
- encourage future research in context of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to (re-)discover and expand an Action Research based philosophy
- demonstrate how the analysis of conflicts can give clues to the distribution of power and participation.

2. Three reference points of this paper: Dialogue, participation and power

In 2009 Werner Fricke stated distinctive features of Action Research:

“– a dialogic relation between theory and praxis (between scientists and practitioners) as well as

- a research process, which is organized in a way that allows the generation of praxis-oriented knowledge, with the aim of improving the working and living conditions (Fricke, 2009, p. 3, own translation)”.

Furthermore Fricke refers to Björn Gustavsen for ideas on how a dialogue between theory and praxis could be designed:

- Everyone in a company who is concerned, from CEO to employees, must have the opportunity to participate.
- Each participant is required to not only present his own ideas, but also to support others in presenting their ideas.
- All participants are equal.
- Practical work experience is a requirement for participation.

- The work function and authority of all participants can be made the subject of discussion – no participant, including board members, is excluded from that (Gustavsen, 1992, pp. 14, 15, own translation).

Basically it is a matter of broad and equal participation of all stakeholders in a dialogic communication process. These dialogues in action research are "the productive center of the entire research process, from analysis ... over the generation of new ... knowledge up to processes of transforming ... reality" (Fricke, 2013, p. 3, own translation)

Transformation of reality has the ultimate goal of improving working and living conditions. This means that, in addition to the factors of dialogue and participation, it is necessary to illuminate the power that promotes or hinders such a transformation of reality.

For analysing power relations Foucault (Foucault, 2005, p. 259ff, own translation) recommends taking a closer look at the following aspects:

- The system of differentiation that allows to influence the actions of others, e.g. status and knowledge,
- the nature of goals that are pursued through the exercise of power,
- the instrumental modalities of exercising power (force of arms, economic inequality, or even just through words),
- the forms of power institutionalisation and the
- degree of rationalisation, i.e. the cost-benefit ratio of using power.

We are going to refer to these aspects of power relations in the context of participatory and dialogic communication at relevant points in this paper.

Regarding procedures, we will let some of the people who were involved in the project speak for themselves in the course of this paper.

3. The need to change the situations for ‘Granny-Nannys’ in Germany

The PflegeWert project was conducted by four tie-in partners, two research partners and two partners working in geriatric care. Core of our joint project was our co-ordinating committee, which consisted of eight members: Malte,

Arno, Ellen (practitioners), Andrea, Ruth, Michael, Paul and Claudia B. (research).

The need to do a project addressing the topic of appreciation of nursing services in German geriatric care has become more and more prevalent throughout the years.

Malte: “The value and appreciation of nursing has always been a topic in geriatric care. We are constantly faced with negative portrayals in the media, whereas this is actually very important work that’s being done here and the people concerned, as well as their families, are very grateful for our help and pleased with our work. It has long been considered, how can we communicate this to the communities and society in general?”

Ellen: “Appreciation has been a major concern in our institution for the past 30 years (...). We have employees working here that do not dare to say that they work in geriatric care in their leisure time because they are afraid of experiencing reactions like people calling them ‘granny-nanny’ or similar strange terms. There are many strange ideas of what geriatric care is and what working in geriatric care is like.”

PflegeWert is a project for implementing systematic appreciation of services offered in the field of geriatric care. Inpatient geriatric care was selected as our field of research. To gain a better understanding of the difficulties that we encountered in the course of our project, the project and its structure are explained in detail.

4. Recognise – promote – experience appreciation: PflegeWert

PflegeWert was funded by the BMBF. Since the researchers involved did not receive government funding before the project’s approval, the difficulty arose, that there were no, if any, or only few financial resources to develop the project design within a dialogue with the employees of the participating facilities. That is why there were only a few phone conferences as well as a conceptual workshop, with the future co-ordinating committee members, for the development of the project. However most parts of the project’s design were conceptualised by the researchers. In order to still meet the requirements of participatory research it was important that from the very beginning, the research process was designed as an iterative process (Figure 2), so that the

practitioners who are actually working in the field of geriatric care had the opportunity to redesign the project's concept at all times.

One basic idea of our project was to increase work-motivation of those who work in the service industry of geriatric care through appreciation, and to transfer the industrial concept of 'worker's pride', adapting it to the area of geriatric care. Appreciation of skilled service work and pride in one's own performances are important motivational factors, as well as central resources for business innovation (BMBF, 2006, p. 13). While in most industries the work process results in a product that can be looked at, touched and examined, geriatric care does not result in anything that can be looked at or measured in that sense. The moment, in which the act of nursing has been provided, the service is done. Geriatric care and the outcome of geriatric care are, in this sense, flowing and quickly 'gone'. Since there's no tangible 'product', with which pride could be captured and measured, we first had to find alternative approaches to pride and appreciation. So in "PflegeWert" researchers followed the works of Gouthier (2006), and distinguished five interrelated levels of appreciation:

1. self-esteem
2. appreciation through customers and family members
3. appreciation through colleagues and team managers
4. appreciation as part of the organisation
5. appreciation through society.

The researchers' promise to the BMBF was to generate ideas on how these five levels could be implemented sustainably, and then subsequently to develop tools for systematic appreciation. Finally we wanted to write down suggestions for action and provide them for all institutions interested.

The entire project was set up as a tie-in project for a period of two and a half years, with two research partners and two practitioners involved. The MA&T Sell & Partner GmbH (MA&T) is a private research and consulting institute, with experience in participative design of research- and change-projects (see e.g., Sell & Fuchs-Frohnhofen, 1993; Fuchs-Frohnhofen, Stahn,

& Unger, 1997; Brandt & Fuchs-Frohnhofen, 2001; Schimweg, Fuchs-Frohnhofen, & Brandt, 2012).

They were also the project co-ordinators for this project. They and the German Institute for Applied Nursing Research (DIP) were the researchers. Caritas Betriebsführungs- und Trägergesellschaft mbH (CBT) as an organisation with different nursing and retirement homes as well as Stiftung Evangelisches Alten- und Pflegeheim Gemünd (EvA), as one other nursing home, were the practitioners who participated. Through the co-operation and ongoing dialogue, between researchers and practitioners, in this joint project, practical relevance of the developed tools and concepts as well as their feasibility could be guaranteed. Due to the different sizes of the participating facilities, CBT represented the organisational view on this topic, while EvA focused more on the views from staff and team management.

A special feature of our PflegeWert project, compared with other research projects funded by this BMBF call, was the fact that the practitioners had their own research proposal and received research funds for their participation in this project. This already indicates an endeavour towards a participatory approach in which the practitioners are equal research partners and not just the “field of study” without its own research funds, as is usually the case in German research projects.

Ellen: “It was very clear that we are four partners in this project. Two in charge of the scientific monitoring of our research and the other two, working in geriatric care, would provide examples and practical insights, and therefore complete the research process. Everyone had a task he or she was assigned to. EvA brought in more employee-related knowledge. We (CBT) were responsible for the organisational view on our research. That was the reason why our two organisations had been chosen. EvA owns one nursing home and only did research in this house. Due to our 14 institutions we have a more complex view on things. So we agreed that the research results from EvA’s team could be easily transferred to any other single nursing home. So in order to avoid double-examination, and in addition to the results from team EvA, we at CBT focused on the organisational context.”

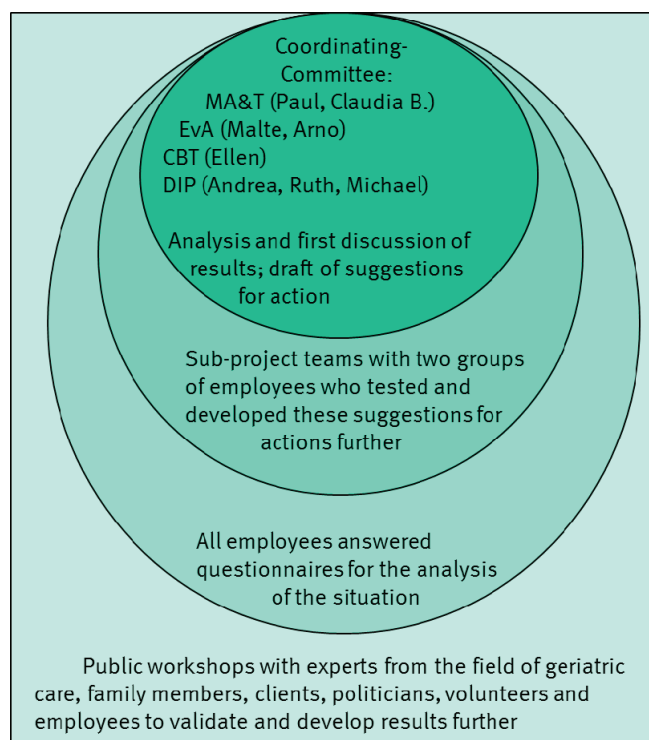
At the beginning of our project, the co-ordinating committee was formed, which consisted of the eight members mentioned in Chapter 3 (Figure 1). The

task of this co-ordinating committee was to decide on the theoretical framework for the project and initiate and direct the various sub-projects, as well as deduce suggestions for action.

Some of the co-ordinating committee members (Paul, Malte and Arno) already knew each other, the other unfamiliar co-ordinating committee members also perceived this existing relationship as positive for their own relationship building.

Andrea: “I thought that it was actually very helpful, because it was like we were joining them in their relationship. It was actually very positive. I would say we benefited from that existing relationship.”

Figure 1: Organisational structure in our project ‘PflegeWert’



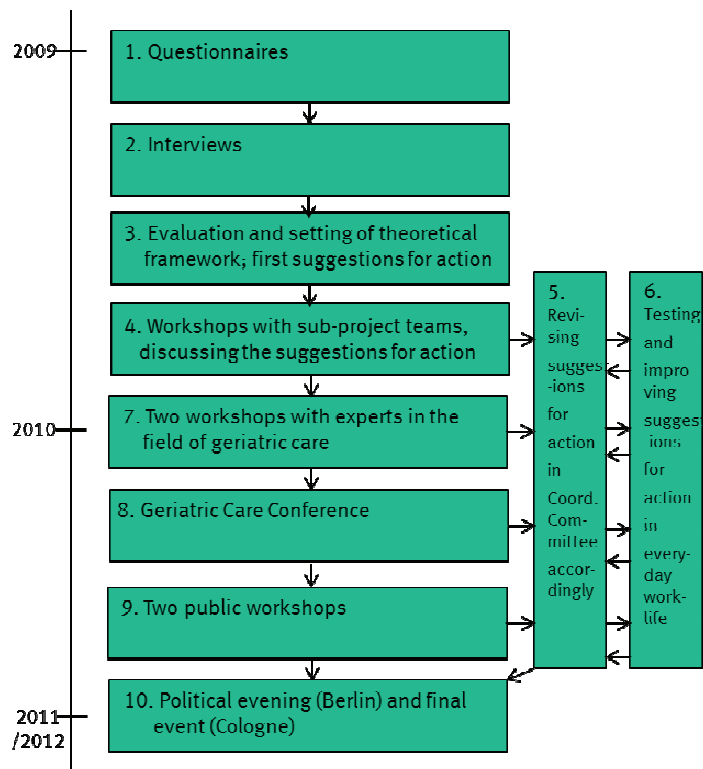
Besides our co-ordinating committee there were sub-project teams, which consisted of employee groups and individual co-ordinating committee mem-

bers. Tasks of these subgroups were to discuss the theoretical considerations of the co-ordinating committee and to put the suggestions for action into practice. Results from the sub-project teams were reported back to the co-ordinating committee members, so they could adjust the theoretical considerations and suggestions accordingly. This structure of a co-ordinating committee and sub-project teams developed in the first stages of the project, when the project proposal was designed due to the lack of financial resources (Chapter 4). This structure was not brought into question after the real project work had started, since during our project it showed that the employees who were involved in the sub-projects teams felt more comfortable working in a group without executives, as they felt that this way they could speak their minds more openly. It was not until we reflected on our project for this paper, that we realised that this reflects badly on our communicational structure between the committee members and the employees (more in section 8). The entire staff was involved in the initial survey, which was the starting point of our project.

The progress of our project can be divided into 10 processes (Figure 2), which were “(...) process(es) of research, learning and action. (They were) iterative, with each building upon the other” (Grant et al., 2007, p. 590) and some of them running parallel. Like mentioned above, our research started with an analysis of the actual situation. Questionnaires were completed in all 15 participating institutions, asking questions about the relationship between colleagues, the relationship to team management, the amount of workload and positive mental resources, health, work and quality of provided services. One part of the questions was taken from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ), but other parts were discussed intensively in the co-ordinating committee and decided on mutually. Furthermore thanks to the impulse from the practitioners’ side e.g. the questions were formulated in a more positive way than originally planned. That does not fully answer the question of the distribution of power in the co-ordinating committee, but more about that will be explained later on. A small set of questions asked in this questionnaire were generated after a document analysis had been conducted prior to the questionnaire, at the facilities. These generated questions dealt with the current usage and availability of tools for appreciation in these

facilities. Second Process: the questionnaire results were supplemented by interviews. Eight staff members and seven team managers were interviewed and asked about their work. They were asked to describe the characteristics and specific tasks of their work, to give their opinion on the visibility of their work and tell their professional biography. Third Process: These results were evaluated and used for building the theoretical framework and identifying relevant levels of appreciation. Based on these assumptions the co-ordinating committee came up with initial suggestions for action for the various levels. 4th Process: To examine these suggestions for action regarding their feasibility and comprehensibility, they were first discussed in workshops in project subgroups with a group of employees.

Figure 2: Process structure of our project ‘PflegeWert’



5th Process: The first of two workshops was held with experts from the field of geriatric care, associations and academia to discuss the initial considerations, as well as the initial theses and provide an opportunity for networking. In the second workshop, the focus was put on the first drafts of suggestions for action for two certain levels of appreciation: ‘self-esteem’ and ‘appreciation as part of the organisation’. 6th Process: On Geriatric Care Conferences results were discussed with other people and professionals. Through this systematic integration of experts and professionals, who were not part of the project and its teams, we could ensure that our research process was always maintaining practical relevance and furthermore we were able to collect more valuable input for our research. 7th Process: There were two public events with three different workshops held. One took place at the nursing home of EvA and the other took place in one of the nursing homes from CBT. Employees, local politicians, residents, family members, volunteers and representatives of other organisations accepted the invitation to participate. These events focused on ‘*appreciation through society*’, as well as ‘*appreciation through customers and family members*’. This was another opportunity for us to further validate and develop our theories and suggestions for actions. 8th Process: Simultaneously these suggestions (see 4th process) were implemented in the everyday work life of both project sub-groups at EvA and constantly tested, critically examined and modified if necessary. 9th Process: The theories and suggestions for action were constantly adapted to the latest findings from the other processes, and thus continually evolved in an iterative loop. 10th Process: At the end of our project a final event was held in Cologne, as well as a political evening in Berlin. Here results of the project were presented to the public, discussed and made available for everyone, interested in this subject.

For complex collaborations of this kind, including many different actors from different hierarchy levels, with different spheres of influence, experience and educational backgrounds, conflicts are inevitable. “Collaboration necessarily includes conflicts, not all of which can be easily resolved” (Isenberg et al., 2004, p. 126).

5. Paving the way for a democratic dialogue

When we look at the work, being done by the co-ordinating committee, two questions arise, from an action research perspective: Did we succeed in initiating a democratic dialogue (according to Gustavsen)? And how was power distributed within the committee?

About the democratic dialogue it can be said, that the co-ordinating committee's work suffered at first, from the fact that the idea and aspiration of a democratic dialogue existed in some of the committee members' head, but was not explained, and that there was a basic notion about rules of communication, but they were not explicitly agreed on. Furthermore our project did not succeed in giving everyone working for the participating facilities the opportunity to participate in the co-ordinating committee. Instead "praxis" was represented in this committee through three executives: Ellen, Malte and Arno.

Looking at the distribution of power within this co-ordinating committee we think that:

- the system of differentiations, the status and knowledge, seemed to be equally distributed: while the researchers may have had slightly higher status in the public and more theoretical knowledge, the practitioners had a higher status in the participating facilities and more practical knowledge.
- the nature of goals that were pursued in the project was mutually agreed on: After an open and intense discussion in the co-ordinating committee about personal goals (recognition, reputation, etc.), which were granted, a broad consensus was reached in the ultimate goal of improving the working and living conditions for the occupational group of geriatric nurses.
- the opportunities for exploiting power were also evenly distributed but not used: the practitioners were aware of the fact that the project would only be successful if the scientists would participate actively in the project, especially in writing publications and applying their project experience, while the researchers knew that the practitioners had the power to quit the project by backing out. That would have made it impossible to reach the

project's goals. As well as there would have been an economic disadvantage for the researchers: something the participating facilities did not have to fear.

As an external sign of these reflections it was decided that all members of the co-ordinating committee became equal publishers of the final publication of the project (see Fuchs-Frohnhofen et al., 2012).

Power and participation of different parties become most evident in conflicts. Power can be used to prevent conflicts or to enforce decisions, and thus end conflicts quickly. Power can also be "...about keeping issues and actors from getting to the table in the first place" (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, p. 174). While on the one hand, conflicts can cause individual parties to not want to participate any further in the project, conflicts, on the other hand, also mean that the space for participation is given, or at least fought for. To illustrate our experience with power and participation, it is necessary to draw attention to the conflicts that took place in the course of our project.

We want to focus on two types of conflicts that appeared in our project: First, conflicts within the co-ordination committee and second, conflicts in the public and political discussion about the results, which also reflected the problem of participation and power based on the geriatric nurses 'ability to influence society.

6. Conflicts in PflegeWert

The conflict, which took place at the beginning, was about the questionnaire, which was used as an initial analysis of the actual situation (Chapter 4; 1. process). Not only the wording of the questions and the items used were debated, furthermore, it was discussed what data should be collected and over which period of time this data gathering should be done, as well as whether there should be the opportunity for a personal reference or not, so that the people who answered the questionnaire could be linked to their answers given. The fact that this conflict arose, shows that the researchers did not dictate the *modus operandi*, but put the entire research process up for discussion.

6.1 Teething troubles

During one of the first co-ordinating committee meetings a conflict between Ellen from CBT and the research partners, who had been entrusted with the data collection, emerged, because of the COPSOQ questionnaire. COPSOQ was chosen because it gave us the opportunity to compare the results from our project-based surveys with results from other surveys. This resulted in the ability to paint a clearer picture of the situation, and to embed the results of the project in a wider context. However, it was hard for Ellen to come to terms with the questionnaire.

Ellen: “I know that we wrestled about this COPSOQ questionnaire a lot. We (co-ordinating committee) discussed it at length, because we (CBT) found that the language which is used there is not appropriate since it already intends certain answers and implicitly assumes that ‘*Altenpfleger*’ have a hard time doing what they are doing (...).”

The questions and their wording were perceived as very critical by Ellen. She initially was afraid what kind of impression she, and the CBT consequently, would communicate to their employees, regarding their attitude of the profession. This conflict was resolved through a compromise. Specific questions, meeting Ellen’s critique that not only negatively framed questions should be asked, were added to the questionnaire. So in our final version of the questionnaire there were not just questions like “How often do you feel tired?” or “How often do you feel emotionally drained?” but also questions like “How often do feel happy?” or “How often do you think you are doing a meaningful job?” The question, whether or not the questionnaires should allow a linkage to the people who answered them, was discussed much more heavily, and did not leave room for a compromise. The researcher’s interest was to evaluate the extent to which self-esteem leads to greater job satisfaction. Therefore it was planned that questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the project were to be handed out to the employees. This was supposed to increase the validity, since the comparison of ‘before’ and ‘after’ is the only way to evaluate whether the activities and actions taken in the course of this project have had a positive influence on job satisfaction.

Andrea: “The questionnaire phase was at the very beginning, and raised the suspicion that somehow, we do not have the same opinion on this subject. Accordingly there was much need for discussion. (...) More than anything researchers want to somehow interview the same people at least twice. This is a unique opportunity for researchers, to do a survey at the beginning of a project, and another one, with the same people at the end of the project – a longitudinal study. So, obviously I would have been very happy about it. My heart as a researcher would have been thrilled, yes. But due to privacy issues, it was not possible. The practitioners had to protect their employee’s privacy (...).”

In the retrospective interview Ellen stated, that Andrea’s desire to create the opportunity for a personal linkage confirmed Ellen’s mental image of research and researchers, as high-handed and inconsiderate to aspects regarding privacy in favour of data. In previous research projects Ellen had experienced researchers as people who only care about data and facts and less about people and situations.

Ellen: “Employee survey is a very sensitive subject in our organisation. We have done this several times, and often problems concerning the anonymity and privacy of our employees occurred, due to the attitude of the scientific institutes, which were involved at the time and which imposed their questionnaires on us. Therefore this has become a difficult and sensitive subject at CBT.”

According to this sensitivity there were several passionate discussions at various points during the project. This intensity was felt by both people involved as well as people on the sidelines. The uninvolved partners sometimes felt uncomfortable in those situations of conflict.

Malte: “You know that they say ‘a thunderstorm clears the air’ but when you are standing right in the middle of it, that moment is quite uncomfortable – especially when you are not directly involved, but just standing on the sidelines.”

It was always clear that the conflict was about different interpretations of the work that had to be done. This was addressed in an open talk the coordinating committee had, right after the meeting, in order to reflect on the conflict together.

Andrea: “I never had the impression that Ellen wanted to pick fights with me, but I’ve always had the impression that she has an opinion, and she uses professional and distinct means of communication to impose her opinion, and I respect that. Now, if I have a different opinion and I also want to push through, well then that’s my problem. But it is a professional problem. For all the other team members it was certainly uncomfortable, we have talked about this with everyone and even Ellen and I had a talk about it, just the two of us... It was not like we tried to sweep it under the carpet (...). I do not feel like Ellen was ever being unfair to me and I hope that Ellen feels the same about me, too. At least we definitely know now, that both of us have strong opinions (*laughs*).”

At last everyone agreed on a different research methodology for the employee survey. Instead of performing an evaluation on the effects of the actions and activities in terms of job satisfaction, employees explained requirements for, and feedback on, the activities and actions that they participated in.

Nevertheless, due to this conflict Ellen felt confirmed in her mental image of scientists, and Andrea on the other hand was a little dissatisfied and uncertain whether the findings without the ‘before’ and ‘after’ questionnaires would suffice and be good enough. Her fear that without a long-term study the results could not be enough was revised during the course of our project. Since the outcome of our project has taught her better, her perception of the issue subsequently changed.

Andrea: “I cannot say this is still a conflict, and I’m still sad that the employee survey did not take place in our proposed ex-post form, because I learned about the practitioners’ perspective, learned to appreciate their view on the subject and learned to respect it (...) But back then I felt like the longitudinal study was my personal work order. Today I don’t see it like this anymore, like it’s a shame that I do not have this long-term study, today I say ‘It’s nice that we have achieved common ground’.”

Thus, in the end, she has found an alternative to her originally intended work order. This is a very important learning point in Action Research, i.e., that one’s theoretical preferences might improve in the dialogue with practice.

At the beginning Andrea saw the long-term study as her opportunity and her ‘work order’ and according to her self-understanding as a researcher, she

and her ‘researcher’s heart’ passionately defended the idea of the longitudinal study. With her demeanour during these first few weeks of working together, she unconsciously confirmed Ellen’s reservations about researchers, which resulted from previous project experiences. This is important to keep in mind for the further development of the co-operation.

6.2 A big bang at the end

While in the course of the project there were no other major conflicts, and in the interview everyone stated that the actual process of working together was felt to be constructive and target-oriented by everyone involved, there was one last major conflict at the end of the project. Reasons were different ideas on how, and especially how practice-oriented, the project results should be presented.

Ellen: “There has been this preliminary final meeting. During this meeting things got a little extreme. The subject we talked about was how to do the documentation of our results. Scientifically certain requirements have been adhered to, but to me it was important that the findings we came across were made available to people working in the field of geriatric care in a way that they could easily implement the tools in their facilities and that all of our activities were presented in a comprehensible manner since we have achieved incredibly great results.”

Andrea: “At each meeting we discussed ‘What do we want to present? How do we wish to express that?’ The researchers always tried to use the official scientific language, which is not always the right language for practice and the people working there. We discussed this, I think permanently, during the last meetings.”

This conflict was perceived as much more intense than the other one. It even got a personal touch for Ellen.

Ellen: “I don’t really remember the words anymore, but to me it was a personal attack, like saying ‘You are not able to understand this’. We are talking about people, you know! I felt that was quite heavy stuff.”

Andrea did not share this sentiment. For her, this conflict was not personal, but was accounted for by the different natures of interest.

Andrea: “I do not think it really was a matter of me wanting to attack the CBT and CBT wanting to attack the DIP – not at all (...) if you only experience harmony, then I do not know if that’s always really honest. I found it very honest that everything happened the way it did (...). So yes, heads did clash. I am someone who speaks my mind and there are other partners who do as well (...) naturally there are times where we have different opinions, but I never felt like it was a (personal) confrontation. And I’ve never tried to give the impression that I think it is something personal. I think the conflict was natural and resulted from different attitudes and different points of views (...).”

But Ellen didn’t agree.

Ellen: “This attitude ‘We have to represent the results scientifically – to live up to the standards of science’. Time and again we talked about that same topic. I have thought about that afterwards, maybe the reason why the last conflict escalated in the end, and why it was so disappointing, was because I felt disappointed. I thought, after all those teething problems at first, we did an amazing job working together for the past two years (...) and I felt, we have successfully linked theory and practice, but then all of a sudden this disappointment at the end about the way of documentation ‘What are we doing this for?’ And then to realise that they are primarily concerned with how science can use the results for its own grandstanding and to realise that for them it’s not really about putting everything into practice. I found that a bit frustrating. (...) But thankfully we did succeed with our idea of presenting suggestions for action.”

Although the co-operation was considered to be constructive and goal-oriented by everyone, Ellen’s image of research and researchers was confirmed once again. This realisation, that despite the great collaboration and project progress, her reservations were actually justified and for her to feel that this co-operation is ultimately just like all the previous projects, that were filled with negative connotations, resulted for her in a strong disappointment.

The conflict shows which difficulties can occur when/as the separation of researched and researcher is given-up in Action Research. By not taking the role of a researcher as an observer and interviewer, who watches from a distance and asks questions from afar, but by gaining results in a close collaboration, which is much more influenced by the individual biographical backgrounds, people interact closer with each other. This can then lead to

open conflicts and disputes but, if openly reflected, to a new level of co-operation.

7. PflegeWert's effects on the power and participation of geriatric nurses in German society and politics

Our PflegeWert project had the goal of improving the working and living conditions of people working in geriatric care in Germany.

Through their survey results and their communicational input, the employees made it clear that such an improvement of living and working conditions can not only relate to the appreciation within their direct work environment, but must also involve society and politics, with the result that the social and public discourse in Germany draws a more positive and appreciative picture of geriatric care. Furthermore, appreciation from the political perspective should lead to better staffing of the publicly funded care facilities, and a better remuneration of employees.

PflegeWert has sought to contribute to those subjects. In several public workshops, involving members of parliament, journalists and local "dignitaries", rooms for discussion were created, where geriatric nurses themselves could state their demands to the government and society, and were supported by their bosses and the researchers involved. The reactions to those workshops, from the press and those who were involved, show that this approach was successful (e.g. Schrader in CareKonkret Newspaper No. 8/15 (2012); Heinen in Kölner Stadtanzeiger 27.05.2010; Pesch in Kölnische Rundschau 29.07.2010).

Those efforts culminated in a final public event in Berlin, where spokesmen of the parliamentary parties, the German association of nursing professions, and the German union of the service sector took part and where the conflict became evident, that when it comes to increasing appreciation for geriatric care, politics indeed pays lip service, but holds back with concrete commitments regarding staffing and remuneration. But at least for those geriatric nurses who participated, it became clear that it is possible to give a voice to geriatric care in the political discourse, and to contribute to a more positive image of their profession, not only in the context of their work

environment, but also in the national public, by making their dedication and involvement public (Memorandum “Den Wert von Pflegearbeit schätzen” of Verbundprojekte Pflege, 2012).

According to Foucault, power is about getting others to take action (Foucault, 2005, p. 255ff.). Therefore one step can also be creating room for discussion, so that those who are in charge of making decisions do not make them without dealing with the employees beforehand. Our rooms for discussion allowed traditional structures, in which employees do not talk about political and superordinate decisions with those in charge, to be overruled.

8. Power and participation in PflegeWert

As mentioned above, power and participation are outlined best in conflicts. The way conflicts are handled and resolved, says a lot about people’s perception of their own and the other people’s position.

Ellen: “I can’t really tell, but it might be possible, that some people might have thought, that I was trying to usurp power, but for me it was never about power (...) I just wanted to make sure, that everything geriatric care is at CBT is respected and accepted. Scientists often have an inaccurate or incomplete picture of what things might be like and I wanted to correct that image a little bit, along with all the assumptions that scientists make about geriatric care.”

Andrea: “No, I did not have the impression Ellen was trying to usurp power. I could understand why she (Ellen) acted the way she did. (...) She’s in a powerful position jobwise. She has lots of responsibility in her position, as far as I can tell (...) I have always made it clear that naturally I have to represent the research institution’s interest and mainly I have a research interest of my own to defend but compared with Ellen – who is responsible for hundreds of employees – that is a much lesser responsibility. (...) I’ve always taken her behaviour as an expression of opinion.”

Relations of power are immanent in all kinds of relationships (McLaren, 2002, p. 37). We also had different powerful constellations in our project. Despite the fact that there has been an urgent need for doing a project on this subject of increasing the appreciation for the ‘*Altenpfleger*’ profession in geriatric care, in the facilities that participated, ultimately it was the BMBF

that outlined the project and its objectives with its call for proposals and its position as source of money.

Hierarchies and resulting power have an impact on participation. Who dares to take part? This must be taken into account in all types of projects.

Malte: “Executives were in the main project group (co-ordinating committee) and the employees were in different subgroups. That was good, since this way there were no hierarchies within the groups, which certainly helped to motivate some quieter employees to participate. The researchers, who participated in both groups (co-ordinating committee and subgroups), then communicated the results from group to the others, taking into account the structures and the trust they were given. So when sensitive topics, such as workload, were addressed by the staff within the subgroups, the researchers communicated the relevant information to us (co-ordinating committee) in a sensitive way, respecting the staff’s privacy.”

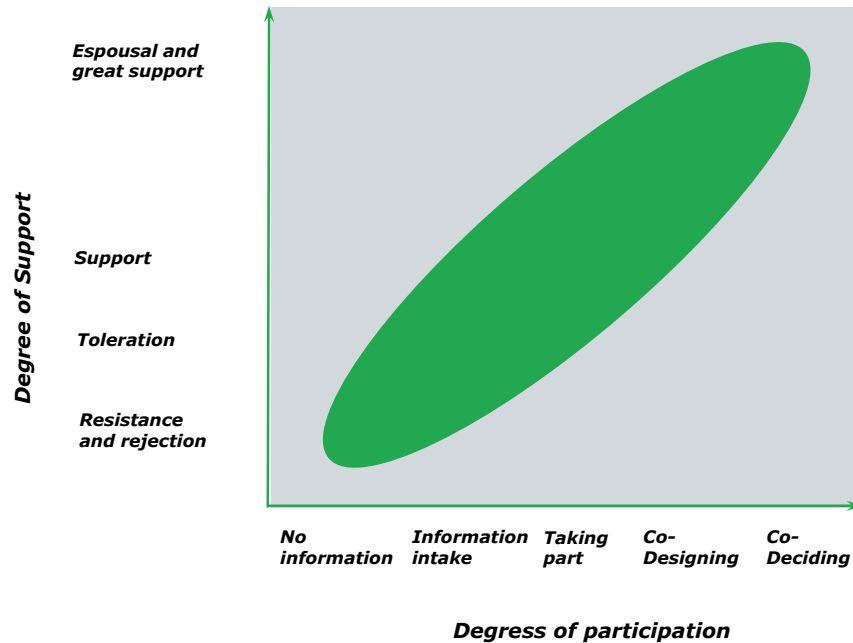
The researchers’ privileged role of participating in both groups came from the employees’ reaction that they preferred to not work in one group with their executives and the researchers complied with their wish to function as the voice of the employees and communicate their ideas and remarks to the executives in the co-ordinating committee. Now in retrospect we realise that we should have questioned that wish and try to find out what lies beneath. Where do the employees’ restraints come from? Is there anything they are afraid of? By addressing those issues we might have been able to open the door for “real participation”. But perhaps we researchers were too fast in accepting a privileged role at this point.

Participation as we define it is the “...timely and continuing involvement of all stakeholders in problem-solving and decision-making (...)” (Fuchs-Frohnhofen, Stahn, & Unger, 1997, p. 100). Participation is not an either/or factor but something that ranges between different degrees (Figure 3).

Looking at participation in terms of incorporating the various stakeholders, we were not able to really incorporate the employees at all times but at least the methods that were developed (like a concept for better self-appreciation or a manual for more effective and positive public relations) were developed with the employees so that we can confirm that “research, aiming at co-generated knowledge and at being useful and contribute to change, has to happen in close co-operation with those that the research

concerns, subsequently they themselves are partly responsible for a successful outcome” (Johnsen, 2010, p. 70).

Figure 3: Continuum of participation (Schimweg & Stahn, 1996)



The practitioners in the co-ordinating committee members were constantly involved in every stage of the process, and this equal participation came as a positive surprise for some of the practitioners:

Malte: “The framework of how the project was planned was broadly defined. It was clear that the researchers would work on the theory and that the practitioners would be responsible for trying to find an answer on how this can be translated into practice? In hindsight, however, the staff was much more involved in the development of the theoretical basis. They were working as real researchers: that was not initially planned, or at least that was not clear to me in the beginning. Originally, we thought, scientists develop theories, but ultimately we were involved in the development of the theory as well.”

Since in all kinds of relations and relationships power and certain hierarchies are inherent, it takes a conscious effort to create an equal co-operation that is characterised by equal participation. This requires discussions time and again to prevent certain hierarchy structures to manifest themselves. Our project succeeded in overcoming some obstacles of participation but failed in going the path further to create a situation in which the employees speak for themselves at all levels of the project.

9. The power of communication

Open communication serves the purpose of achieving joint decisions. It is the best way to ensure that the decisions made during such a project are supported by all parties.

Malte: “We always came to decisions together – both the co-ordinating committee and the sub-project groups. (...) We were all in the same boat.”

Andrea: “I think that we all did not know exactly how decisions would be made at the beginning of this project. But it became clear, quite soon, that decisions were made together.”

By reflecting the views of each individual at crucial moments and by only coming to a decision after everyone gave their consent, it was tried to convey a feeling of equality. Whenever possible we tried to find a consensus that allowed a balance of interests, instead of someone having to hold back for the sake of finding a common ground, but naturally we did not always succeed.

However, communication, especially in interdisciplinary collaborations, is often difficult, since not everyone is familiar with certain terms and concepts. This can easily lead to people feeling excluded, and everyone having their own idea of the meaning of certain words.

Malte: “At first I was careful, because you soon notice that you’re entering a new world. And all of a sudden there is this new language. For example the word ‘project design’: I have been working in geriatric care and I studied Business Administration. Initially I had very different ideas of the word ‘design’ – I associated stuff like colour and shape..., and when everyone wanted to talk to us about the project’s design, I thought to myself ‘What are they talking about?’ Situations like this make you realise

that some things, that are common practice for researchers, are new to you and there is obviously a risk... that it's easy to feel like an outsider."

Ellen: "Everything that concerned language turned out to be difficult. I think we never defined the term '*Pflege*' for our project. We never clarified what 'good geriatric care' actually means. That was something that annoyed me a lot: they always said things like 'Good geriatric care needs to allow for this or that...' but then I always said 'well, but what does 'good geriatric care' mean'? Define that for me please!' But that has not been done up until the end: although that term was used throughout the entire project. I found that sort of difficult."

While Malte could easily be informed about the meaning of the term 'design' in the context of research, the problem of a different understanding of the term '*Pflege*' could not be solved. Time and again it appeared as if everyone was using the same word, but with a slightly different meaning.

Communication reveals feelings, motives and experiences which shape collaborations. Communication and action can meet and trigger emotions. Above all the power of communication requires trust and confidence.

Andrea: "One has to trust, that by speaking your mind, you do not destroy the relationships, you have established in that team so far. I did not think it was pleasant at all times, but I have perceived this as a learning process and I have always found it to be fair."

Often silence is perceived as the more convenient way. Talking about disunity or at least dissent may bring along fears of damaging the cooperation and changing the relationship in a way that the collaboration is not able to continue. Accordingly, conflicts should be addressed in a manner that ensures everyone involved, that this conflict is nothing personal but something that just has to be solved to continue the project as a team in a respectful manner. In this sense the dialogue should be conceptualized as a dialogue of sharing, caring and daring.

Andrea: "Everything was addressed. I never had the impression that we (co-ordinating committee) only addressed the nice and kind subjects (...) (but) you as a team, have a common goal (...). You can always refer to something as a conflict, but ultimately, if you stick to a dialogue that's daring, sharing and caring, then everything you talk about is ultimately not

a conflict but just an agreement: that maybe took a little longer to make...”

This concept of a dialogue that is sharing, caring and daring, goes back to Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2004). “Sharing means that all partners should willingly share their knowledge with other participants. Daring means that they are willing to run a risk and question their own and other’s basic assumptions or self-referentiality. Caring means that the exploratory mood is based on an honest and forthright intent towards others.” During the course of our project this concept of a dialogue as sharing, caring and daring has turned out to be the backbone of our co-operative work.

10. Discussion

Ongoing, open communication is therefore key to creating a balanced power relationship, which involves everyone. Often, however, particularly in conflicts that arise in projects characterised by equal power and participation structures, the underlying assumptions and experiences that characterise the conflict and its history are not communicated. Thus, despite an open and transparent communication, despite the fact that decisions were achieved through consensus, however, we were not able to find out that the conflicts that emerged were conflicts of roles and role assumptions: For Malte it was his first research project. Accordingly, he approached the project open minded (‘cheerful naivety’). In conflict situations, he took a more observational stance. Ellen has had prior experiences in previous projects, in which she has developed an image of researchers, which is more influenced by negative associations. Partly frustrated by her previous experiences she made a conscious decision at the beginning of this project to ensure that a transfer into practice would be made, and to not let herself be pushed around.

It is crucial in interdisciplinary projects to recognise that the mode of practice and interests of researchers and practitioners may be different at the beginning. The inclusion of two different perspectives, science and practice, results in a high need for clarification, especially in action research. The goal of a project is usually known at the beginning, but to decide on a way, how to achieve this goal, a consensus has to be found. The framework of practice is

often unfamiliar to science, and the same is true vice versa. A talk addressing this subject of unfamiliarity, is, however, often considered redundant or unnecessary, since this is not part of the project design. To gain an understanding of each other is nevertheless crucial for the success of a joint project. Without clarification early in the course of the project, unexpected disturbances can occur. In our project, these disturbances occurred even at the end, after 2 years. A dialogue-intensive phase maybe could have helped us handling the conflicts.

In our case it would have been helpful to explain the concept of Action Research to everyone at the beginning.

To introduce everyone to the concept of Action Research could have served as a foundation to illuminate the changed roles of the researchers involved. Moreover, in this context, not only roles could have been communicated, but also attitudes and experiences that shape the perception of this role could have been discussed. Insecurities concerning one's role or inappropriate role models might have been revealed and addressed.

Andrea: "I wasn't actually really aware of it (the roles in this project). One is usually quite certain about your own role. But how we would distribute the roles within our co-ordinating committee... I think, I had no idea ... but I thought it was great how things developed."

This uncovering of roles and role expectations and experiences can also simultaneously provide the basis for a team-building process. This is also something that should not be forgotten, and could have gone better for our project.

It would have been the job of the more experienced project co-ordinator to help everyone finding their role as a team member, in a project in which typical social research structures are dismissed. Maybe this would have helped to create a team spirit more early.

Andrea: "In retrospect, we realised that we were the same, because we were no longer just plain researchers, but also part of the team. We realised that in hindsight (...). We always knew we were part of the team, but in a more abstract way. If you are asking me for my personal opinion – it wasn't until our first joint events (workshops) that I felt like being part of a team."

Either way the results obtained in our project were assessed as very high concerning their sustainability, by all parties.

Malte: “Actually, our environment (geriatric care) is rather deficit-oriented. We usually do not see people get well, but the attention is usually rather directed at death. But through this project we were able to change the perspective a little bit and break away from this deficit orientation. Appreciation has become an inherent part of the organisation and our view on this subject has been permanently changed.”

Ellen: “It will have an impact on geriatric care, because we really managed to bring together research and practice, because I think a lot of answers or questions we have asked, we have tried to develop precise suggestions for action that are very practice-oriented.”

Andrea: “In the presentations, which I’ve held since then, I always said that it is not the easiest thing to do a co-operative project; but I think and I am really convinced after our PflegeWert project, for the sustainability of project results, joint projects of researchers and practitioners are the best way.”

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